

For many students, the creation of a piece of writing is a mysterious process. It is a laborious, academic exercise, required by teachers and limited to the classroom. They do not see it as a way of ordering the mind, explaining their thoughts and feelings, or achieving a personal voice. Even more problematic for students is the ability to interpret primary documents and/or political cartoons as a source while creating a higher order work within a written document.

Primary documents and political cartoons of a specific era of time present on the spot historical evidence that may or may not require the student to have other specific factual information surrounding the event. Often students fail to understand that primary documents/political cartoons are merely witnesses to the historical times. Just as witnesses are questioned in the courtroom in hopes of fleshing out more specific information, students need a technique to flesh out an interpretation of the primary document/political cartoon. One such strategy is known as S.O.A.P.S. This strategy will allow students to become “Historical Scene Investigators” of a particular moment in history. A primary document can be viewed as an actual witness to the historical event; the H.S.I. needs a technique to collect the evidence for the particular witness

**I: S.O.A.P.S.** The acronym S.O.A.P.S. provides students with prompts that provide them with a strategy for dissecting and interpreting primary documents/political cartoons for higher order synthesis when juxtaposed with specific factual information.

**Who is the Speaker?** When interpreting the primary document or political cartoon, the student should immediately try to determine the speaker of the document. Sometimes this is easily identified as the primary document may have a source to it that readily identifies the speaker. Yet in other instances the speaker may be confused with the author of the primary document who may be witness to an event including the speaker. Once the speaker can be identified, the central focus for the student can now become: What facts are known about the speaker and/or author? What are possible assumptions about the speaker’s frame of reference and point of view? Note: **(The source of document and any symbols used in the document can add to the document’s voice.)**

**What is the Occasion?** Often when interpreting primary documents, students need to be able to determine the time and place that prompted the documents creation. Where and when was the source produced? And, how might this affect the meaning of the document? Once determined, the occasion can help students interpret the larger experiences/events of the time that the primary document originated from, allowing for students to draw conclusions on the attitudes and emotions of the document.

**Who is the Audience?** Primary documents more than likely have an audience that they intend to address. It may be one person or a specific group of people. In determining the audience, students need to address the frame of reference and point of view of the audience while attempting to determine how the primary document addressed the needs of the intended audience. Once the audience is established students can make inferences as to how this might affect the reliability of the primary document.

**What is the Purpose?** Students need to consider the purpose of the text in order to develop the argument and the logic of the primary document. Students need to make assumptions about the reasons behind the primary document. The purpose may help establish inferences as to why the document originated. For example, was the document intended to be a form of propaganda?

**What is the Significance?** Why is this primary document important? This is the last component to the process and is often times the written component for students. After going through the process of fleshing out the information in the primary document, students should be able to compose a **definitive statement(s)**. The definitive statement(s) may draw conclusions about the primary document in relation to a larger question asked or prior specific factual information the student had as prior knowledge.

**II. Conclusions:** Students with a strategy tool such as S.O.A.P.S begin to possess the ability to frame questions for higher-order historical investigation. Students gain the ability to develop inferences about the primary document, which may allow them to either prove or disprove the historical task/thesis being tested. Teachers can further facilitate the process by using the following question bank once students have completed the S.O.A.P.S.

- ✓ What interesting facts/characteristics do you notice in the above document?
- ✓ What questions are raised about the information?
- ✓ What inferences can be drawn from these questions?
- ✓ What evidence is there in the documents to support these inferences?
- ✓ What insights about this historical period have been gained from this document?

*Sources: Adapted from Alan Lockwood, Methods Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Mr. Tom Howe, Teacher, Monona Grove High School, and the College-Board.*